

Chapter 8
China, from "The Book Of Descriptions Of Countries"
(1340)
Francesco Pegolotti

Introduction

Around 1340 Francesco Balducci Pegolotti, an otherwise unknown agent of the Bardi banking house of Florence, composed a handbook of practical advice for merchants. Pegolotti, who had served the Bardi family's interests from London to Cyprus, drew upon his years of mercantile experience to produce a work filled with lists of facts and figures on such items as local business customs, the taxes and tariffs of various localities, and the relative values of different standards of weights, measures, and coinage. In other words, the book contained just about everything a prudent merchant would want to know before entering a new market. In addition to these catalogues of useful data, Pegolotti included a short essay of advice for merchants bound for China.

Questions to Consider

- According to Pegolotti, what must one do to be a successful merchant in a foreign country?
- Did Pegolotti make any value judgements on the customs and norms of Chinese society?

THINGS NEEDFUL FOR MERCHANTS WHO DESIRE TO MAKE THE JOURNEY TO CATHAY

In the first place, you must let your beard grow long and not shave. And at Tana you should furnish yourself with a dragoman. And you must not try to save money in the matter of dragomen by taking a bad one instead of a good one. For the additional wages of the good one will not cost you so much as you will save by having him. And besides the dragoman it will be well to take at least two good menservants, who are acquainted with the Cumanian tongue. And if the merchant likes to take a woman with him from Tana, he can do so; if he does not like to take one there is no obligation, only if he does take one he will be kept much more comfortably than if he does not take one. Howbeit, if he does take one, it will be well that she be acquainted with the Cumanian tongue as well as the men.

And from Tana traveling to Gittarchan you should take with you twenty-five days provisions, that is to say, flour and salt fish, for as to meat you will find enough of it at all the places along the road. And so also at all the chief stations noted in going from one country to another in the route, according to the number of days set down above, you should furnish yourself with flour and salt fish; other things you will find in sufficiency, and especially meat.

The road you travel from Tana to Cathay is perfectly safe, whether by day or by night, according to what the merchants say who have used it. Only if the merchant, in going or coming, should die

1 upon the road, everything belonging to him will become the perquisite of the lord of the country
2 in which he dies, and the officers of the lord will take possession of all. And in like manner if he
3 die in Cathay. But if his brother be with him, or an intimate friend and comrade calling himself
4 his brother, then to such a one they will surrender the property of the deceased, and so it will be
5 rescued.

7 And there is another danger: this is when the lord of the country dies, and before the new lord
8 who is to have the lordship is proclaimed; during such intervals there have sometimes been
9 irregularities practiced on the Franks, and other foreigners. (They call "Franks" all the Christians
10 of these parts from Romania westward.) And neither will the roads be safe to travel until the
11 other lord be proclaimed who is to reign in place of him who is deceased.

13 Cathay is a province which contains a multitude of cities and towns. Among others there is one
14 in particular, that is to say the capital city, to which is great resort of merchants, and in which
15 there is a vast amount of trade; and this city is called Cambalec. And the said city has a circuit of
16 one hundred miles, and is all full of people and houses and of dwellers in the said city....

18 You may reckon also that from Tana to Sara the road is less safe than on any other part of the
19 journey; and yet even when this part of the road is at its worst, if you are some sixty men in the
20 company you will go as safely as if you were in your own house.

22 Anyone from Genoa or from Venice, wishing to go to the places above-named, and to make the
23 journey to Cathay, should carry linens with him, and if he visit Organci he will dispose of these
24 well. In Organci he should purchase sommi of silver, and with these he should proceed without
25 making any further investment, unless it be some bales of the very finest stuffs which go in small
26 bulk, and cost no more for carriage than coarser stuffs would do.

28 Merchants who travel this road can ride on horseback or on asses, or mounted in any way that
29 they choose to be mounted.

31 Whatever silver the merchants may carry with them as far as Cathay the lord of Cathay will take
32 from them and put into his treasury. And to merchants who thus bring silver they give that paper
33 money of theirs in exchange. This is of yellow paper, stamped with the seal of the lord aforesaid.
34 And this money is called balishi; and with this money you can readily buy silk and all other
35 merchandise that you have a desire to buy. And all the people of the country are bound to receive
36 it. And yet you shall not pay a higher price for your goods because your money is of paper. And
37 of the said paper money there are three kinds, one being worth more than another, according to
38 the value which has been established for each by that lord.